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## ABSTRACT

Preservice secondary teachers were assigned research on the consumer behavior and habits of junior high school students for the purpose of allowing preservice teachers to discover their own knowledge of young adolescents. Observations were made of groups of students at two typical malls in a southeastern city of around 100,000 population. The approach taken in this study was that one answer to understanding the young adolescent's attitudes toward consumerism may lie in watching how seemingly irrational decisions are made. Observations were made on the social and economic activity of "middlers" and their patterns of consumption. Three conclusions were drawn: (1) young adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14 have special characteristics as a group and exhibit consumption patterns consistent with these characteristics; (2) consumer education for this age group would be particularly appropriate because of its direct relationship to a preferred recreational activity (going to a mall); and (3) it is important for instructors of preservice teachers who will be teaching at this level to recognize the impact of direct, self-managed observational research on these prospective teachers. (JD)

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**A MATTER OF RESEARCH:  
PRESERVICE TEACHERS  
AND  
YOUNG ADOLESCENT CONSUMERS**

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A MATTER OF RESEARCH:  
PRESERVICE TEACHERS AND YOUNG ADOLESCENT CONSUMERS

If thoughtful educators envision prospective teachers as becoming producers rather than consumers of knowledge, as facilitators helping youngsters to implement their own learning goals, it seems important that they view expertise not as consisting solely of the possession of a quantity of information. Imaginative teaching for genuine engagement requires attention to both what needs to be learned and what engages the learner -- it implies a content in which students have some personal stake. How then do prospective middle school teachers discover what may engage a young adolescent learner? How do they produce their own knowledge?

Field experiences seem an obvious choice but observations in school settings have limitations because students are restricted in their social interaction and often stifled from expressing their personal concerns. It was thought that observing youngsters during their leisure hours might prove more productive.

One group of 28 preservice teachers in a spring semester middle school education course were assigned to find out what could be discovered about young adolescent interests by observing them in what was known to be a favorite social habitat -- the mall. The setting centered in a coastal southeastern city of around a hundred thousand population. The two malls contained the usual compliment of national chain operations, local department store, fast food establishments, and specialty shops. While both had the appeal of climate control and movies, one was located in the center

of residential neighborhoods while the other was near a popular resort shopping area.

#### TARGETING THE OBSERVERS

Many of the researchers, who were not far removed in age from those they were observing, had vivid memories to guide their quest. Singly or in pairs, over a period of five weekends, these undergraduates spent late afternoons and early evenings observing, counting, recording, listening, taping and interviewing in their exploration into the economic activities and patterns of behavior of the young people they were soon to teach.

The inquiry was quite unstructured. The only requirements were that the research question(s) be written out in advance and that some type of counting take place. At the end of the exercise, all of the researchers were asked to devise survey type questions that might verify some of their conclusions. The questionnaire was later reworked by a group of graduate students and will soon be used to verify and expand some of the data.

The students devised their own procedures and decided on what they would count or who they would interview. Some found teenage companions, most just watched and eavesdropped. One pair obtained permission to set up a video camcorder near the center of one mall. Viewing this tape helped the students identify social group characteristics and separate out youngsters of inappropriate ages. Two students who had previously worked at malls, interviewed twenty-one merchants and clerks in sixteen of the stores.

From their reading about developmental characteristics during transcence, the researchers made the assumption that understanding the

buying habits of young adolescents would involve observing the entire social scene. Since individuals in this age group tend to rely heavily on peers because it makes them feel more secure and less vulnerable, it is not always possible to isolate personal from group decisions. That was one reason for discovering whether the young people in this age group go to the mall to shop and buy or just to shop around and socialize.

#### TARGETING THE YOUNG ADOLESCENT AS A CONSUMER

The age of transition between childhood and adolescence is hard to describe. Perhaps that is because the youngsters themselves are caught in the middle where they seem to change from day to day. They are not stable in their perceived wants and needs and therefore economic research about them tends to be unstable. They are the middlers who populate that unique institution, the middle school.

Because researchers tend not to recognize them as an age group separate from *children* of six to twelve years of age or *teenagers* who are thirteen to eighteen, we actually know very little about the consumption behavior of youngsters in the middle years. Therefore, although consumer education is often designed for students in middle schools or junior high schools, those who teach, or are preparing to teach, economics at this level are not always well informed about the buying patterns peculiar to the age group.

What do we know about the spending habits of these young adolescents between the ages of ten and fourteen? Statistics tell us that the over ten million young adolescents in this country are participants in the economy

both as labor force and as consumers (Davis, 1987). And, although parents serve as role models for teenage consumers (Kuo, 1987), roles enacted by young teens are a product of peer group influences (Peterson & Peters, 1983). The peer groups are highly delineated, recognizable, and have strong influences on the actions of their members (Lockledge, 1989).

Companies have studied young people's reactions to their products and advertising but there has been a lack of systematic research that looks at spending preferences and the context of purchases (Stipp, 1988). One study regarding the effect of designer labels showed that students in Junior Highs will select such clothing more often, both for themselves and as gifts, and are willing to spend more money for it (Lennon, 1986). A study on the effect of television endorsements indicated that celebrities had more influence because of their likability than for their credibility (McDermott, 1987). Even educators in developing countries worry about the difficulty of implementing consumer education with this age group (Masud, 1984). So how should a prospective teacher go about becoming informed about complex middler buying patterns?

The approach taken in this naturalistic study was that one answer to understanding the young adolescent's attitudes toward consumerism may lie in watching how seemingly irrational decisions are made. Textbook descriptions even if they existed could never supplant observations of the interweavings of social and economic action that underly the consumption patterns. The purpose of this paper is to show the breadth of understanding available to a preservice teacher when observing middleers as they operate without direct adult supervision.

## OBSERVATIONS ABOUT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

On the basis of the five consecutive Friday and Saturday evenings, the observers verified that middlers do indeed often spend two to three hours on a weekend walking about the mall before going to the movies or returning home. The timing of these visits, however, is often affected by athletic and social events in the local schools.

The young adolescents were rarely found alone and seldom seen with parents. They were clustered in social groups of three to five members, all of the same sex and very close in age. Separate groups were easily identified for it seemed that wearing similar clothes consistent with the current fad is a part of being accepted by friends. Groups might merge and talk for a few minutes but after this break, each would get back out into the flow of the crowd where members could saunter along, stopping to look in a window or enter a store.

Males as well as females tended to dress according to a style determined by the group. From those labels readily visible such as the names on sneakers, it was surmised that the groups tended to buy not only the same style but the same brand.

Just as social contacts were never made by individuals acting on their own, consumption decisions appeared to require joint action. Youngsters in this age group are in the process of rejecting parent dominance but do not yet have the confidence to go it alone. Although each group had a leader who was in charge of movement and topics of conversation, purchases seemed to require a consensus. Therefore the groups needed to be small, single sex, and odd numbered to enhance the decision-making process.

The middlers entered stores primarily to look, not to buy. Novelty stores such as Spencer's were the most popular stores in both of the malls visited with music stores next in popularity. Some girls were found looking in stores with trendy clothes but they rarely bought more than a belt or a pair of earrings for a dollar or two. Cosmetics seemed to be another purchase of great concern and tended to be made when adults were not present. Although the girls were oooing and aahing, they were overheard saying they couldn't wait to bring their moms in to see whatever it was they liked. A few boys were observed with parents shopping for clothes but other than that, the boys didn't evidence great interest in clothing stores. When the actual numbers were counted in the various establishments, it seemed that novelty and music stores had two or three boys to every girl while the booksellers and card stores ran about two to one in favor of the girls.

This research among young adolescents in the malls and the clerks who serve them revealed that middlers do their looking and deciding while they are in their own social groups. When making purchases of over five dollars, they usually return accompanied by their parents or at least with the consent of their parents. Clerks in about two thirds of the sixteen stores surveyed, mentioned they had noticed middlers coming in to look around and then leaving saying they had to convince their parents to buy the selection. Because it is so important to these young people to have the approval of their peers, they seem to prefer to shop with their friends and then involve Mom or Dad only for the actual purchase.

Although, more and more children are having part-time jobs at younger ages, most of the middlers appear to be spending their parents' money. In

fact most of the time for anything over ten or twelve dollars, a parent is present to make the final purchase. Clerks report that on occasion a youngster will come in with a credit card or check but the researchers only observed the youngsters paying in cash.

#### OBSERVATIONS ABOUT PATTERNS OF CONSUMPTION

The middlers shop with their friends, as do their parents, as a leisure time activity. In contrast to adults, they evidence strong feelings about almost everything they select. Merchants, recognizing that the shopping as a social activity may result in a later sale, do not discourage these younger shoppers. Yet young adolescents, who have more money, more responsibilities and more influence on purchases than they did in the past, do not make major decisions on their own.

Music is extremely important to nearly all adolescents and this is reflected in their presence in the stores where records and tapes are sold. Clerks notice many youngsters returning during the week with a family member who then buys the desired item. Thus actual purchases of tapes or records, however influenced, are usually made by older teens or adults.

Most of the young teen's own discretionary money will go for a movie and something to eat or drink. While on their own, they usually restrict store purchases to books, novelties, T-shirts, make-up or items marked down for a sale. Only in the novelty stores do clerks report that a goodly portion of the lookers also buy something, choosing the less expensive items such as posters, key chains, and buttons. The purchases they make for themselves seem to have an immediate and direct relationship to the

socializing that is happening at the same time. Favored are the instantly amusing items from the novelty stores, makeup from the drug store, and the "shocking" satanic material from bookstores.

When middlers are spending their own money they tend to be far more cautious than they do when they are selecting something to be purchased by parents. One salesperson noted that when the youngsters are on their own they tend to use their money more wisely. Several observers noted the inclination to buy what was on sale when spending their own money -- but not when returning with parents.

Careful observation reveals that the fads we often think are being advocated by the more stable older teens in the senior high school are in fact being worn by the style conscious middler on the verge of self-discovery. The changeableness of this age group may account for the phenomena of items that can't be kept in stock one week and can't be sold the next. This in itself may be a reason for separating out middlers when looking at consumption patterns.

Clothing store clerks report a current trend toward purchasing dressy clothes so they will be ready for wearing on a special occasion. When it comes to buying a suit or a "good" dress at this transitional time in their lives, the middler relies strongly on the advice of parents who are brought into the decision making process at the last stage. Rejection of parental control in favor of group consensus seems to end when prices exceed fifty dollars.

## REACTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The preservice teachers had no idea that the human development stages they had been studying in abstract would have such a powerful implication for the young adolescent's economic activity. The immediate reaction was one of surprise that the need for group acceptance could so permeate consumption patterns although on reflection, memories tended to confirm observations. The research gave them a different perspective on the manner in which their future students must be approached. They quickly realized that the stance, "you must be an individual and act on your own," will have little or no impact during this transitional period, while learning to make wise group decisions may be essential.

Middlers, then, need to be viewed as a separate group with separate developmental characteristics and should not be confused either with self-reliant teenagers who drive and earn their own spending money or with children who expect and depend upon adult guidance. It is an age for learning from small mistakes. Even though middlers may not want to be told what to do, they are still not ready to take sole responsibility for their own actions. The enormous gap between the developmental stages described by psychologists and learning theorists and the hard statistical data used in the workplace needs to be addressed.

One discovery of importance to those who may teach this age group is that middlers view their presence in the mall as a recreational activity not an economic one. Not only do young adolescents need to be taught economic theory, they need direct consumer education conducted by individuals who recognize the framework of their consumption behavior. If the classroom

learning includes practice in identifying objectives and in group decision-making, it will relate directly to the students' own needs. As recreational consumption is recognized as a questionable basis for wise practice, the consensus building of the middler social group can provide a sensible process for avoiding unwise purchases.

In summary there are three conclusions that may be drawn from this exercise in observing the mall activities and behaviors of young adolescents between the ages of ten and fourteen. In terms of the young people themselves, preservice teachers were able to recognize that they have special characteristics as a group and exhibit consumption patterns consistent with these characteristics. Secondly preservice teachers can validate that consumer education would be particularly appropriate at this level because of its direct relationship to a preferred recreational activity. And finally for those who prepare teachers to work at this level, it is important to recognize the impact of direct self-managed, observational research even though incomplete and flawed in design.

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